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SUBJECT: Commentator Urges Martinelli To Cancel 'Clownish' Panamax Exercises

¶1. (SBU) On September 18, in the middle of the annual Panamax exercise, leading daily La Prensa ran an op-ed by ¶I. Roberto Eisenmann Jr. titled "An Irresponsible, Unnecessary Militaristic Stunt Returns." Eisenmann has long been an anti-military voice in Panama. He is one of the founders of La Prensa, and a major voice in the ranks of the "civilistas" (those who opposed the Noriega dictatorship). The op-ed provides the civilistas' coherent and forceful argument for why Panama should not continue to endorse Panamax. It is important to understand this reasoning so that we can effectively engage here on the full range of our bilateral security agenda.

¶2. (SBU) Eisenmann's reference to a conversation with the SouthCom commander refers to a meeting with ADM Stavridis at the Ambassador's residence in February 2008. Eisenmann encouraged Stavridis to cancel Panamax, as it gave "the (Panamanian) gorillas hope they would one day return to being a military." At the time, Stavridis extended a personal invitation to Panamax, though when the U.S. Embassy Office for Defense Cooperation followed up on the invitation, Eisenmann politely declined.

¶3. (U) Begin text (translated from Spanish by the Open Source Center):

Some 30 years ago the Pentagon decided on its own that the Panama Canal was not militarily defensible.

It was this unilateral decision by the US military, alongside the sacrifice that our youths made on 9 January 1964, that opened up the possibility of negotiations for a new treaty and that changed everything for the good of Panama...and of the United States. There was a consensus that the best defense of the canal was a Panama that was at peace and neutral...without enemies in the world.

Then, some US military officer without a memory, alongside a lot of Panamanian politicians without memories or backbones, dreamed up a clownish militaristic stunt called Panamax to defend the indefensible canal militarily.

Our politicians have not learned that the only thing which the Empire does not forgive--and rightly so--is lies and deceit but that it respects--also rightly so--a firm, substantiated "no" from a reliable opposite number.

Our Constitution bans the military, so the Southern Command has invited to this clownish Panamax exercise (during which three

Panamanian civilian sailors have already died) the militaries of Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras (the recent coup plotters), the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Paraguay, Mexico, France (which gave its Legion of Honor award to Noriega), and as a cover, two countries without militaries: Costa Rica and Panama. Military thugs from around the world together in demilitarized Panama. Brilliant!

This is now the seventh edition of "Panamax Allied Forces": one under Martinelli-Mulino-Obama, four under Martin Torrijos-W. Bush, and two under Mireya Moscoso-W. Bush. This time, Panamax had a land maneuvers phase ("Alpha") and a second phase ("Beta") that consisted of rigorous naval defense maneuvers. Some 6,000 men and a ton of military equipment arrived in the country. The central objective: the military defense of the canal against a terrorist attack. Astounding! The combined armies of 18 countries to "prevent" a terrorist attack by one or two or three people. So the same lie that W. Bush told to declare war on Iraq, with the tragic and disastrous results that we have already seen, is now being repeated in our neutral and demilitarized Panama.

I have had conversations with commanders of the Southern Command (which fortunately is now stationed on US soil) and I have complained bitterly to them about the Panamax exercises, employing all of the arguments that I have noted here. And I have asked them to explain to me what thought process they used to dream up these maneuvers, which reflect a total lack of sensitivity towards our history, towards our demilitarized Constitution, towards our neutrality as a nation, and towards their own decisions about the indefensible nature of the canal. Most of the time their response was blank faces and the remark that "it was already scheduled, and

I'm following orders." Only one of the commanders (a man of respectable intellectual depth) offered a theory: that the Southern Command has an ongoing mission to strengthen ties with the militaries in its theater of operations (Latin America) and that these exercises enable them to get together and do joint work that is always of help to them in this mission. I replied to him that I understood the objective, but I asked him whether it didn't strike him as equally effective to conduct the exercises in the port of New York, or Boston, or even in Florida near his center of operations, instead of here, where such insensitivity is even an assault on our Constitution...and I added that in my opinion the Panamax exercises, far from protecting the canal, were like an incredibly powerful international loudspeaker that was blaring this message: "Attention terrorists around the world! In case you haven't noticed, there is a canal here that could be destroyed by just one of your suicide bombers looking for all those promised virgins in the next world! This business of a neutral canal is just a fairy tale! All of us macho military guys in the Americas are here to confront you!" Whereupon he asked me: "Are you proposing that we go into hiding?" I replied to him that I was not but that attracting the enemy's attention and encouraging him to attack a militarily indefensible asset did not strike me as a good military strategy either.

My most recent conversation with this commander ended with a brash invitation from him: "When the next Panamax is held, I invite you to observe the operation," as if I had never seen clownish militaristic stunts. How long is this going to continue?

President Martinelli, Minister Mulino: This is the government of change! The time has come, rationally and firmly, to cancel the Panamax exercises next year and in subsequent years.

Be bold!

Stephenson